

Syria and the Libya Intervention

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The criticism of the intervention in NATO on the grounds that if the west intervenes to stop mass killings in Libya, they should do it everywhere else as well, is troubling because the corollary is that if the west cannot stop mass killing somewhere, it shouldn't try to do it anywhere. Nonetheless, the intervention in Libya sets a precedent and creates expectations in the region that can create problems for the U.S. and its European allies.

This is most clear with regards to Syria where the regime has been violently cracking down against demonstrators for days with little concrete response from the west. It is more than just ironic that a only a few days after many in the west were congratulating themselves, not without reason, for stopping crimes against humanity in Libya, a few hundred Syrians have been killed by their leader while western powers deliberate about what to do in response.

Syria, like Libya, is ruled by an authoritarian regime which tolerates little political dissent and has, over the years, been quite brutal. While Syria's ruling al-Assad family has never been as outspoken and given to strange statements and appearances as Libya's Moammar Gaddafi, the Syrian regime has been no less cruel or repressive as the Libyan regime. Bashar al-Assad had not made threats towards his own people that were as explicit or colorful as those made by Gaddafi in the days leading up to the intervention, but this has been something of a distinction without a difference. Instead of making bizarre threats, al-Assad has, in the last few weeks, simply killed several hundred Syrians who were demonstrating for greater freedom while encountering little more than words from western powers.

The goals of the intervention in Libya have never been entirely clear, but it can be surmised that these goals included both stopping any potential mass killings in Libya and sending a message that the U.S. and its allies would intervene similarly if comparable situations arose. This message was always a little unclear, because nobody expects the U.S. to intervene in strong countries, for example China, should they begin to commit these kinds of atrocities; nor was it possible to expect the U.S. to be able to act everywhere similar situations arose. Nonetheless, to see the principles established in Libya challenged almost immediately, by a nearby country in a context not radically dissimilar to that facing Libya only a few weeks ago is striking. Given the alignment of circumstances which made the intervention in Libya both desirable and possible, it is not altogether surprising that a case testing the precedent which policy makers sought to establish in Libya arose so quickly.

Any potential demonstration effect which the intervention in Libya might have had, has been erased by the lack of consequences for al-Assad's actions in Syria. Western powers are seeking ways to demonstrate their disapproval of al-Assad at this time, but it is almost

certain that anything similar to the course of action taken in Libya is not being considered. Many worry that if Gaddafi remains in power after weeks of NATO shelling and attacks, he will look stronger while NATO and its component countries will look considerably weaker. This is a serious concern, but the same thing will happen if al-Assad remains in power after killing a few hundred innocent Syrians.

The failure, thus far, of the US or anybody else to do anything to stop al-Assad is not a reason why the intervention in Libya is *prima facie* a mistake, but it demonstrates the near impossibility of western intervention in Libya being an effective precedent for future would be mass killers. History demonstrates that this is frequently the case with intervention seeking to achieve humanitarian goals. These interventions can be effective, as they were in Bosnia and Kosovo, but are unlikely to deter others preparing to commit crimes against humanity.